Improving Services for Children and Families

Report of the Child Welfare Steering Committee

NOVA SCOTIA
Community Services

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Forward

During the past nine months, the Child Welfare Steering Committee has had the opportunity to view child welfare from two different perspectives. First, the projects under our direction have provided us with an in-depth view of how services are delivered on a daily basis, both directly to clients, and through the many support functions which are necessary to make services possible.

Foster parents, youth workers, family support workers, social workers, supervisors, district managers, executive directors, and many others, commit their energy every day, because they know that their work with children, youth and their families is vitally important. Their work is dependent upon the dedicated commitment and contribution of administrators, community board members, administrative staff, child welfare officials, and colleagues in other disciplines. Collectively, these individuals represent the wealth and strength of Nova Scotia's child welfare services.

Second, this initiative has also allowed us to consider child welfare as a system, and how it relates to other child and family serving programs in our communities. We have been able to stand back, and take stock of where Nova Scotia stands in relation to child welfare developments in other jurisdictions, and to assess how we may best integrate knowledge gained through research, recognized best practices, and successful Nova Scotia initiatives undertaken in other program areas. Both perspectives have confirmed that Nova Scotia has a wealth of talented and creative professionals who commit their best efforts, to make a difference in the lives of children, youth and families.

We have been very moved by the spirit of cooperation offered by the more than 75 individuals who have participated in these projects. None of the recommendations in this report should be seen as criticism; all employees do excellent work. Rather, it is our hope that the recommendations will provide a pathway to continue the work of this initiative, as we increase our effectiveness in daily activities, and collectively improve child welfare's system of care for children, youth and their families.

In closing, we would like to offer our sincere thanks to the project participants and leaders, members of the steering committee who have guided and directed the projects, and finally to the Minister of Community Services, for giving us the privilege to serve as co-chairs of these critically important initiatives.

Judith Ferguson,
Assistant Deputy Minister
Department of Community Services

J. D. Coffin,
Past President
Children's Aid Society of
Cape Breton-Victoria

Introduction

This report provides a pathway for improvements to Nova Scotia's Child Welfare services. The recommendations range from process improvements and support functions, through to transformation of major components of the delivery system itself. Taken together, they represent significant progress towards achieving the commitment of the Department of Community Services (DCS), to services that promote the independence, self-reliance and security of the people we serve, through excellence in service delivery, leadership and collaboration with our partners.

Background

For close to a century, many Nova Scotian communities have proudly served children, youth and families in need through local child welfare services. They have enriched our province, and brought lasting benefits to the children and families served. Nova Scotians are indebted to all who have brought leadership or made a direct contribution to this caring community tradition.

While Nova Scotia is fortunate to have such a rich heritage, the current administrative structure for child-welfare delivery was established over 70 years ago. There is awareness across the sector that the system, as it is currently configured, requires restructuring, if it is to continue to meet the needs of children and families in an effective manner. To initiate this restructuring, the province began a review process to determine the best governance model to guide and oversee child welfare service delivery in the future.

This process started in January 2001, when the Minister of Community Services established a Joint Working Group of agency presidents and senior officials of the Department of Community Services. In its final report to the Minister in 2002, the working group recommended that longstanding structural issues present in the system be addressed.

In response, the province commissioned an independent review by Deloitte and Touche in 2003. In addition to holding extensive interviews with child-welfare practitioners and community representatives in Nova Scotia, the reviewers also evaluated other governance models for service delivery across Canada. In their report, Deloitte & Touche recommended that all child welfare services be delivered through government offices. Following the release of this report, the province initiated a consultation process regarding their recommended governance model.

The consultation process included focus groups with child welfare practitioners, community boards and other key stakeholders; a call for written submissions from interested parties; comments from interested members of the general public through a DCS website; and a toll-free telephone line.

Recognizing that some issues could be addressed independent of formal restructuring, in 2004 the Minister appointed a Child Welfare Steering Committee, to act as a joint working forum representing child welfare agency boards of directors, and senior officials of the Department of Community Services, to recommend improvements for child welfare services.

Child Welfare Steering Committee

The Child Welfare Steering Committee is an eight person working forum of senior officials from the Department of Community Services, and presidents of the community directed child welfare agencies. The Committee has been co-chaired by Judith Ferguson, Assistant Deputy Minister of Community Services, and J.D. Coffin, Past President, Children's Aid Society of Cape Breton-Victoria, in his role as chair of the Child Welfare Agency Presidents.

Agency Presidents selected one representative from each of the other three regions. The presidents sitting on the Committee were:

- Dave Freckelton, President, Children's Aid Society of Pictou County
- Jean Bremner, Past President, Children's Aid Society of Halifax
- Mike McNeil, President, Family and Children's Services of Queens County

Staff from the Department of Community Services included:

- George Savoury, Senior Director, Family and Children's Services & Community Supports for Adults
- Phil Warren, Regional Administrator, Western Region
- Vicki Wood, Director of Child Welfare

The members of the committee have recognized the depth of responsibility entrusted to them, and endeavored to be sensitive to the needs of employees, communities and others effected by the services under their review. They have shared a commitment to strengthen service delivery on behalf of children and families, and to ensure that the services and existing resources within child welfare are used to provide maximum benefit for children.

Steering Committee Mandate

The committee's primary task was to review services and prepare recommendations for the Minister in the following key service delivery areas:

- child welfare placement system
- on-call/after hours services for child protection
- jurisdictional issues influencing Foster and Adoption Services
- opportunities for shared services and facilities between the province and the community-based child welfare agencies

The steering committee established four projects with appointed chairs to lead the work on the designated areas. Project chairs were able to consult with external organizations or experts, as deemed necessary. However, the chairs reported to the steering committee, who directed the work, and served as their primary reference group. In addition, each president on the steering committee sat on one of the four projects, on an ex-officio basis. The Director of Child Welfare also served as the project chair for placement redesign.

Project descriptions were developed and approved for each of the designated areas, and membership was appointed. Senior agency membership was selected by the presidents and executive directors forum for each project. Representatives of district, regional and head offices were appointed by the Department of Community Services. Project chairs recruited additional members from within child welfare and residential services, and affiliated organizations, when necessary to complete the work of their committees. The approved terms of reference, finalized project descriptions and membership lists were circulated to all agency and department staff in December 2004.

The terms of reference stated that the work of the committee should be guided by a vision for child welfare as a mandated program within the broader spectrum of services for families and children in Nova Scotia. Therefore, the steering committee undertook additional activities in keeping with this mandate, in addition to overseeing the four service delivery areas.

These activities included: an examination of the social determinants of health, and their relationship to clients served by child welfare, as well as a mapping project, which has examined child welfare's relationship to other programs, with an emphasis on prevention, family violence and early childhood programs.

Finally, the steering committee hosted staff consultations through meetings with child welfare and residential services representatives from the Canadian Union of Public Employees (C.U.P.E.), the Nova Scotia Government Employees Union (N.S.G.E.U.), and employees from non-unionized agencies. These meetings provided a valuable opportunity for dialogue with direct practitioners regarding their observations, perspectives and advice with respect to the four project areas.

Projects and Decisions

All committee decisions were considered from the perspective of the best interests of children. The resulting recommendations have been tailored to enhance the delivery of foster, adoption, residential and emergency duty services. The recommendations will both improve children's access to services, and increase the range of available services. Finally, the recommendations will streamline administrative practices. This will ensure that the resources within child welfare are used to derive maximum benefit for clients, and that savings generated through increased efficiencies can be redirected to services for children.

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Recommendations

On Call Services

The on call services project examined the call/after hours system currently used within the child welfare agencies and district offices. The project's primary goal was to identify and recommend opportunities where emergency duty, including supervisory consultation, could be shared, with the view to streamlining delivery. The project group was also asked to identify new provincial standards, HR procedures and IT capabilities that would be required for implementation of the new service.

The committee recommends that:

- the Minister establish a 1-800 provincial on call service, to be operated from the Central Region, extending the existing Central Region after hours system. It will be responsible for receiving all emergency duty after hours calls from across the province from 4:30 p.m. to 8:30 a.m. on weekdays and 24 hours on weekends and holidays. This service will assess and process these calls, and when necessary dispatch local child welfare staff to any matters deemed in need of an immediate response, and provide supervisory consults for these responses, in accordance with the Child Protection Standards Manual.

Implementation:

Immediate implementation is recommended. This will reduce the workload burden on casework supervisors, ensure consistency in practice when responding to after hours calls and achieve maximum benefit from financial resources.

Shared Services

The shared services project examined facilities, equipment, administrative processes and services that support child welfare in Nova Scotia. The project goal was to identify and recommend opportunities where services could be shared among community agencies, district offices and regional offices.

The committee recommends that:

- web-based Accpac be adopted as the standardized accounting software for all child welfare agencies.
- web-based Accpac software be implemented for all payroll processing, including the direct-deposit function.
- the Provincial Government's telephone services, including cellular services, be adopted for all child welfare agencies.
- the Provincial Government's stationery stockroom services be extended to all child welfare agencies.
- links to agency web-pages be placed on the Department of Community Services' web-page.

- the Provincial Government's Career Beacon services be extended to all child welfare agencies.
- opportunities for additional shared services be examined, once the outcome of the On Call, Foster and Adoption and Placement Redesign projects are known.

Implementation:

Immediate implementation is recommended. This will standardize and increase the efficiency of financial and time management functions, expand the purchasing power of agencies and ensure that maximum benefit is attained from financial resources.

Foster and Adoption Services

The foster and adoption project examined agency and district office practices and procedures arising from jurisdictional boundaries, that may act as barriers, or place restrictions upon a child's ability to obtain a foster family or adoptive family placement. The goal of the project was to recommend options to remove barriers, and facilitate open access for children to these critical resources.

The committee recommends that:

- a comprehensive child in care per diem be developed, to cover all standardized items. It is recommended that individualized items, such as recreational activities, continue to be approved on an individual basis. It is also recommended that a new funding procedure be developed within existing resources, and evaluated at the end of the first year of operation.
- the Department of Community Services assume responsibility for the opening and closing of all foster and adoptive homes on the case management system, designating them as provincial resources.
- the daily support and management of families be delegated to the local child welfare agency or district office.
- the home study assessment function be consolidated with the recruitment and training functions currently delivered by the Department of Community Services's regional foster resource teams.

Implementation:

The committee recommends that the department develop an implementation plan, and proceed with the recommendations as expeditiously as possible. This will allow for a more timely assessment of families who wish to foster, provide children and families with enhanced access to services, and streamline administrative procedures for foster parents and social workers, allowing for time to be devoted to joint case planning.

Placement Services

The scope of the placement services project was much larger than the other three, and had several sub-committees, each with their own chairs. The project goal was to develop a model for a full continuum of placement services for child welfare. It also reviewed services to families prior to placement; best practices for managing dangerous behaviour; outcomes; services to children with disabilities; a framework of financial policies; and, accountability mechanisms for residential services.

Recommendations

- **Comprehensive planning for children**
  - establish an annual review of child-in-care plans, to ensure that each child has a specific measurable plan to achieve permanency, in compliance with provincial standards.
  - develop inclusive per diems for residential and foster care services, and streamline administrative practices associated with policy 94 and policy 75, to enable social workers, foster parents and residential service providers to increase their emphasis on planning for children.
  - establish a range of services that support children, youth and families at home, to prevent placement, when possible and appropriate, through the introduction of a differential response program. These services should be established through service agreements and/or partnerships with approved community agencies that have demonstrated success in prevention, parenting programs, and services to youth.

- **Placement coordination and navigation processes**
  - establish and appoint directors of admission services with the authority, responsibility and accountability to place children in residential services, parent counsellor programs, and specialized levels of foster care services.
  - establish the placement authorities as a separate service, rather than as components of an existing child welfare agency or district office, to maintain a degree of independence, necessary for fair and transparent operations and equitable access to service.
  - introduce a standardized assessment tool to assess each child who needs placement services, to determine the most appropriate placement resource for that child, including foster care.

- **Continuum of placement services**
  - establish a new continuum of residential placement services, within existing resources, differentiated on the basis of the level of care provided. All Minister approved service mandates should be based upon standard program descriptions, as supported in research, the professional literature, and recognized best practices.

- the new continuum of care should establish the type of settings, number of beds, levels of care, demographic distribution and geographic locations.

- the distribution of resources should ensure that the continuum includes programs that meet the placement requirements of children with complex needs, and are able to prevent and manage dangerous behaviour. Multi-disciplinary and interdepartmental support from Health, Education and Justice should be obtained when necessary, to meet the placement, learning and career needs of children and youth in the care of the Minister.

- **Accountability**

  - introduce a provincial accountability framework for placement services that establishes clear authority and accountability structures, and includes financial policies, program policies, annual service contracts, and approved outcome measures.

  - revise the current funding model. Since admission decisions will rest with a placement authority the current funding model for grant agencies will be replaced with 100 per cent operating grants, and annual service contracts.

- **Outcomes, evaluation and quality assurance**

  - in addition to the current monitoring and evaluation processes, introduce an outcomes based approach for placement services. This would be phased in over time, as the investment in technology and training allows. Program outcomes will become part of the service contract.

  - a logic model be employed to develop indicators of child well being, based on the following critical and developmental dimensions for children: safety; health; education; identity; family, social and community relationships; social presentation; emotional and behavioral development; and self care skills.

Implementation:

It is recommended that the department develop an implementation plan, and proceed with the recommendations as expeditiously as possible. This will: increase the range of programs available to serve children and families in Nova Scotia; improve accessibility to residential services through the creation of a single point of entry; and, a high quality, responsive and flexible system will be created by the coordination of services across organizational boundaries.

Conclusion

The standard of care set out in the *Children and Family Services Act* is that of wise and conscientious parents. The steering committee members have been mindful of this public trust, and have used the 'best interests of children' as the benchmark for their decisions and recommendations. We recognize that these principles have also been embraced by the project teams, and all who have contributed to this initiative. It is the committee's hope that the good will and common vision that have been generated and shared throughout this process, will continue as we go forward collectively to implement the recommendations.

Appendices

1. On Call Services

The on call services project examined the call/after hours system currently used by child welfare agencies and district offices. Its main goal was to identify and recommend opportunities where emergency duty, including supervisory consultation, could be shared, with the view to providing consistent service delivery, reducing the after hours workload carried by casework supervisors and better utilization of resources. The project group was also asked to identify new provincial standards, HR procedures and IT capabilities that would be required for implementation of the new service.

Membership

The project was chaired by Gary Porter, Regional Administrator of the Central Region. Joining him on the project were:

- Judy Baker, Manager of Human Resources, DCS
- Anne Blandford, Executive Director, Children's Aid Society of Pictou County
- Brenda Knox-Townsend, Executive Director, Family and Children's Services of Queens County
- Beverly MacDonald, Acting District Manager, Sackville District Office
- Don Totten, Child Welfare Specialist, Western Region
- Mike McNeil, President, Family and Children's Services of Queens County, Ex- officio

Consultation was provided by Leonard Doiron, Acting Director of Child Welfare, and members of the Department of Community Services Information Technology Services division, as required.

Work Plan

The project team conducted an analysis of the after hour emergency duty child protection services throughout the province to identify key issues and potential resolutions. Their objective was to recommend a new system of after hours emergency duty child protection service that was consistent in the application of the child protection standards, consistent in service delivery, reduced the after hours workload of casework supervisors, was cost effective and provided enhanced client service delivery.

Each agency was asked to provide financial, volume and other data on their emergency duty services for the 2003-04 fiscal year. All agencies were able to provide volume data, and a total of 8,537 calls were reported. Additional data was collected on 5976 calls, or 70 per cent of the total volume. When necessary to address gaps created by the other 30 per cent, projections were made based upon available data.

Key Findings

The break down of volume by region in 2003-04, was as follows:

REGION	# OF PHONE CALLS	PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL CALLS
Central Region	4367	51%
Northern Region	1650	19%
Western Region	1361	16%
Eastern Region	1159	14%
Total	**8537**	**100%**

The peak times for service demands were:

SHIFT	# OF PHONE CALLS	PERCENTAGE OF PHONE CALLS
4:30 pm to 12:30am	7071	83%
12:30 am to 8:30am	818	10%
Weekends	648	7%
Total	**8537**	**100%**

A "Go Out" is a direct worker to client contact based on a risk analysis of the information reported. The risk analysis is done in consultation with the casework supervisor. It was estimated that 736 calls required the worker to client contact. These were broken down by time frame to be:

SHIFT	OF THE 736 "GO OUTS"
4:30pm to 12:30 am	618 (or 8.7%) out of 7071
12:30am to 8:30 am	81 (or 10%) out of 818
Weekends	37 (or 5.7 %) out of 648
Total	**736 calls out of 8537**

The fixed costs of the current system were defined as all expenses incurred by the agencies, that are necessary to operate an emergency duty system. The total fixed costs for social work and supervisory staff stand by compensation, pagers, and answering services were $399,600.

The information gathered illustrated the inconsistencies in service delivery. It also highlighted a significant pressure on staff, particularly supervisors in small agencies/district offices as a result

of their on call schedules. The number of staff on call in the province is significant and the committee questioned whether this was an appropriate utilization of resources particularly for staff currently working long hours to accommodate being on call while maintaining daily case load responsibilities.

Assessment of Options

Several options were considered as alternatives to the current model. After reviewing the strengths and limitations of each alternative, a central dispatch model, situated in the Dartmouth district office, and integrated into the central region's after hours service, was determined to be the most appropriate.

Under a central dispatch model, a 1-800 provincial on-call service would be established to receive and process all emergency duty after hours calls for the province. When necessary, jurisdictional agents would be dispatched to respond to matters requiring an immediate action. Supervisory consultation would be provided centrally.

Implications

- A requirement for all agencies to continue to have trained agents on duty. They would no longer be required to have supervisors on stand by or call back, unless they were operating as gents. Some agencies may need to reconcile the changes with collective agreement, and/or personnel policies.
- Supporting provincial policy and standards should be developed.
- Agencies may need to update their cell phones, and develop report back procedures when staff enter areas that are out of signal range.
- A reduction in the workload burden for small agencies/district offices.
- The human resource plan for the new service will require some additional staff and will need to consider staff training.
- IT support, including changes to the case management system would be required to support the proposed model. An IT work plan would need to consider the following:
  - the case management system would need to be available on a 24/7 basis. It is currently unavailable for designated periods on Sundays;
  - the emergency duty team would require provincial access to the system;
  - codes and involvement screens on the case management system specific to emergency duty, including new codes that would need to be developed;
  - a data base of agents and resources, by agency, would need to be created and maintained; and,
  - information collection and reporting will be required for statistical reporting.
- A detailed communication plan and roll out strategy would be necessary to ensure that agencies, police, and community partners establish a solid network, and a clear understanding of the new system; and, that key community stakeholders and the general public are fully informed of the changes.

2. Shared Services

The shared services project examined facilities, equipment, administrative processes and services that support child welfare in Nova Scotia. Its main goal was to identify and recommend opportunities where such support functions, facilities and equipment can be shared between the community agencies, district offices and regional offices.

Membership

The project was chaired by Donald MacPherson, Regional Financial Coordinator, Eastern Region of the Department of Community Services. Joining him on the project were:

- Randy Acker, Executive Director, Family and Children's Services, Lunenburg County
- Michael Melnyk, Executive Director, Children's Aid Society, Inverness-Richmond
- Ross Sheppard, Human Resource Consultant, Department of Community Services
- David Freckelton, President, Children's Aid Society, Pictou County, Ex-officio

Consultation was provided by Finance and Administration, and Information Technology Services and the regional financial coordinators of the Department of Community Services, and the executive directors and accounting staff of the agencies.

Work Plan

The project team took an inventory of shared services already in place, such as the case management system, financial services system, province-wide IT services and shared insurance policies. Each existing area was assessed to determine where they could be extended or broadened in scope.

The team then expanded their review, to consider such areas like: accounting software; financial transaction processing; telephone systems; procurement; web-based services/information; employee benefits; and staff recruitment. The purpose was to identity additional opportunities to shared services.

Finally, administrative tools and processes that are handled differently by several organizations, were reviewed to determine; what brought the greatest benefit; were the most effective, or, may be identified as representing best practice.

Once the shareable administrative tools and processes were short listed, supporting data was requested from agencies and district offices on these specific areas. The data was reviewed, to assess potential benefits with regard to cost savings, increased efficiency, or greater consistency in practice.

Key Findings

The following areas were identified as having the greatest potential for shared services:

- accounting software
- payroll processing
- telephone systems
- stationery stockroom supplies
- human resources

Assessment of Options

Standardized Accounting Software

Several options were considered. Web-based Accpac was determined to be the best option. It would provide the most consistency at this time. It was also the best financial option, as an existing agency already owns the software, has a dedicated server, and the capacity to extend the service to the others.

Standardized Payroll Processing

Again, Web-based Accpac was determined to be the best option, providing the most consistency. It was also the most cost effective option, with an estimated cost of $6,300 for the 14 agencies.

Benefits of a Web-based Accpac include:

- the infrastructure (dedicated server & software) already exists;
- annual software maintenance costs for fourteen agencies will be less than that currently charged for nine agencies individually;
- department IT Services are able to provide data backup, security, and disaster recovery;
- upgrades/tax table updates are done once instead of fourteen times;
- the system is web-based so secure access is possible from any internet connection; and
- EFT/Direct Deposit is an available function within the program.

Standardized Telephone Systems

Many agencies use the province-wide telephone system managed by the Department of Transportation and Public Works (TPW). No agencies currently use the cellular system. The TPW system represents much higher purchasing power than available though any other means available to the agencies. Additionally, web-based reporting is available through Powerplay. Therefore, full use of the TPW telephone system, including the addition of cellular services, was assessed to be the superior, and therefore, the only feasible option to pursue.

Standardized Stationery Stockroom

Given the purchasing power and economies of scale represented by the Province's existing stationery stockroom system, this option was again assessed to be the superior, and therefore, the only feasible option to pursue.

Other Opportunities

Two other areas were assessed as having benefits for shared services. First, links to agency web sites, where they exist, could be placed on the Department's public web site, along with all the relevant contact information. Second, that Career Beacon, the Atlantic Province's online employment opportunities website, could be extended to agencies. This could assist agencies with staff recruitment, ensure consistency for job postings, and provide all staff with up to date information on career development opportunities.

In addition, the committee recognized that the other three projects could result in opportunities to explore shared staffing in the future.

Implications

- The annual costs for Web-based Accpac is less than what is currently charged for nine agencies on an individual basis. However, there will be set-up and training costs. Therefore, this is a cost neutral recommendation for the first year.
- Projected savings require that direct deposit functions be brought in-house. The direct deposit function of Accpac may need to be phased in on an individual basis, to reflect the expiry dates, or other terms of existing agency contracts with external providers.
- The transfer of telecom services may need to be phased in on an individual basis, to reflect the expiry dates, or other terms of existing agency contracts with external providers.

3. Foster and Adoption Services

The foster and adoption project examined agency and district office practices and procedures arising from jurisdictional boundaries that may act as barriers, or place restrictions upon a child's ability to obtain a foster family or adoptive family placement. Its main goal was to recommend options to remove barriers, and facilitate open access for children to these critical resources.

Membership

The project was co-chaired by Jill Wilson-Kingston, Coordinator of Foster Care Services, and Ms. Anna Paton, Senior Solicitor, both from the Department of Community Services. Joining them on the project were:

- Barbara Brown, District Manager, Sackville District Office, DCS
- Ian Wright, Acting Executive Director, Children's Aid Society and Family & Children's Services of Colchester County
- Carol MacLellan, Child Welfare Specialists, Eastern Region, DCS
- Janet Moore, District Manager, Kings District Office
- Edward Vale, Executive Director, Family and Children's Services of Hants County
- J.D. Coffin, Past President, Children's Aid Society of Cape Breton-Victoria, Ex-officio

Consultation to the project was provided by:

- Phyllis Parker, Executive Director, Federation of Foster Families of Nova Scotia
- Yvonne Blanchard, Executive Director, Nova Scotia Council for the Family
- Janet Nearing, A/Manager, Adoption and Children in Care, DCS
- Foster Families selected by the Federation of Foster Families of Nova Scotia

Work Plan

The project group invited presentations from the adoption project, foster care services, reviewed best practices, and conducted an inter-jurisdictional review of how foster and adoption services are delivered in other provinces. They also collected and reviewed the following data:

- adoption statistics April 1, 2004 - March 31, 2005;
- case management annual reports foster care 1999 - 2004;
- children in permanent care and custody as of March 31, 2005;
- foster care placements March 31, 2000 - March 31, 2005;
- children in care statistics March 31, 2000 - March 31, 2005; and
- foster care caseload size March 2004.

The project team also reviewed statistical data collected by the placement project team, regarding the average length of time it takes agencies and district offices to complete foster family assessments, once potential families have received training and an initial safety check.

Finally, the project group developed a list of barriers, agreed upon by the members, and forwarded them to each child welfare agency for feedback.

Key Findings

Foster families are the foundation of the placement system for children and youth in care. They provide children with safe, nurturing environments that promote their emotional, mental, physical, and social development, until they return to their families, are adopted or become independent. Access to prospective adoptive parents is also a critical resource for children, providing them with secure nurturing homes when they are not able to return to their birth families.

Children, foster parents and prospective adoptive parents are facing a number of difficulties that have serious ramifications for the future of our system. The project team traced several issues to practices and procedures related to the geographical and jurisdictional boundaries of child welfare agencies. Specifically, the 13 agencies governed by community boards, by virtue of their incorporating documents, or by Section 8 of the *Children and Family Services Act*, are limited in their practices and procedures to their territorial jurisdiction. In contrast, district offices managed by the Department have full provincial jurisdiction.

Two other factors were identified as key contributors to the reported difficulties. First, the number of jurisdictions providing foster and adoption services was seen as burdensome, and no longer a viable method for service delivery. Finally, shifts in population and the changing demographics of Nova Scotia impact upon the distribution of workload, and ultimately, the level of support provided to families. In rural jurisdictions where populations are declining and new foster parents are not entering the system and caseload sizes are small. In the Halifax Regional Municipality and areas where the population is growing caseloads are significantly higher.

Taken together, these three conditions challenge child welfare's ability to provide equitable access to foster and adoption services throughout the province. The following key findings can be grouped into those which arise from the structure of child welfare's delivery system and those which reflect social work practices.

Issues Identified:

1: Structure of the service delivery system

- The size and jurisdictional boundaries of some agencies do not support the specialized case work and supervision required for quality foster care and adoption services.
- Nova Scotia's boundary defined child welfare structure does not reflect current needs and optimum use of placement resources.

- Foster homes are approved by the child welfare agency and are considered an agency resource. Limiting the selection of foster families to the jurisdictional boundaries of the agency may limit the range of foster families available to meet the particular needs of a child.
- Placement practices have evolved to protect access to the resource of foster families. Practices for accepting placement outside the jurisdictional agency are either non-existent or inconsistent.
- The attachment of foster families to the agency with jurisdiction where they live limits the capacity of that foster family to provide service to another agency, where appropriate.
- The data show that in some areas of the province foster parents have extended vacancies in their home. Foster parents in more heavily populated areas experience overuse and report fatigue.

2: Social Work Practice Issues

- Information sharing and exchange about available adoptive applicants and available children does not always support best choice of family.
- Foster parents are being reimbursed differently as a result of differing interpretations of policy 94. These differences dramatically affect foster parent satisfaction and ultimately retention.
- The procedures for submitting receipts for reimbursement under policy 94 was also found to be extremely labour intensive for staff and foster parents.
- Placement of children and youth in foster homes within the jurisdiction of another agency can be compromised by the differing interpretations of policy and levels of financial support provided to foster parents and the child/youth in care.
- Outdated approaches persist in foster and adoption services in some areas. Decisions do not always reflect current knowledge of best practices in relation to permanency planning, thereby compromising outcomes for children, and providing foster families and adoptive parents with inconsistent levels of support.
- Foster parent applicants transferred to the local child welfare agency are not being contacted in a timely manner to begin the foster family assessment and subsequent approval process. Data collected by the placement project reported that wait times in excess of one year are common in three of the four regions. This is of particular concern, as families will have already invested significant time in training, and undergone the initial safety check through their work with the department's foster resource teams.

Assessment of Options

The ability to recruit new foster families and adoptive parents, and retain experienced families already within our system is of vital importance to Nova Scotia. Therefore, the project team developed options that would reduce structural and jurisdictional boundaries, lessen inconsistencies in practice, and increase the time available to support foster and adoptive parents.

The three criteria were also seen to be consistent with emergent trends in the field. For example, families now participate in activities that extend beyond the traditional agency structure, such as regional and provincial training. These experiences highlight local deviations in the application of policy, such as level of support, and inclusion at children's case conferences and planning meetings. They also encourage foster and adoptive parents to shift their loyalty and identity beyond that of serving their local agency, to a focus on the children and youth who require their care, no matter where their geographic origin.

In reviewing the options, the steering committee focused on three points. First, it was agreed that all foster families and prospective adoptive parents should be regarded as provincial resources. Though in most cases, families will continue to care for local children, sharing this valuable critical service across the system will improve access and matching for children, and alleviate placement pressure carried for social workers. It will also promote a more equitable use of families, easing the current patterns of under and over utilization.

Second, the steering committee found that the current bill-back procedure under policy 94 is not only cumbersome, but is also so labour intensive that it takes away from the critical task of planning for children. Streamlining this administrative procedure will allow child-in- care social workers to focus on inclusive permanency planning for children as their primary task. It would improve consistency for foster parents, by reducing the differing interpretations of policy 94.

Finally, the steering committee found that foster care social workers must attend to daily operational pressures and new program enhancements with open families. These frequently take priority over the completion of home studies for new applicant foster parents. Reassigning the assessment function to the foster resource teams would bring two benefits. First, since the resource team social workers have already invested time getting to know the applications though pre-service interviews and training, they could complete home studies more efficiently Second, and most importantly, members of the public who offer their service as foster parents would receive timely responsive service, commensurate with the value of their contribution to Nova Scotia's children and youth in care.

Implications

- New communication procedures will be required to ensure that information gathered through the home study approval process is shared with the local agency / district office foster care social workers.
- A workload review and human resource plan will be required to address demographic changes and the transfer of the assessment function.
- The transfer of foster or adoption program components or redeployment of staff could have implications for the viability of smaller agencies in providing this service.
- The creation of an inclusive per diem for children in care, though cost neutral, will require amendments to policy 94.

4. Placement Services

Placement services are provided by approximately 600 foster homes, six parent counselor programs, 30 licensed general residential programs, and 18 programs designated for children with disabilities. Placement services are delivered by 32 separate organizations. Collectively, they serve approximately 2000 children and youth in the care of the Minister of Community Services.

Placement services account for approximately $52 million in annual expenditures. This figure does not include service providers who interact with placement services, through their work with families, youth and children in care.

The scope of the placement services project was much larger than the other three. The project's primary task was to develop the model for a full continuum of placement services for child welfare. In addition, it also reviewed services to families prior to placement, best practices for managing dangerous behaviour, placement outcome measures, services to children with disabilities, accountability mechanisms, and financial policies for residential services. Sub-committees, with their own chairs, were established to focus on each of the additional areas.

Membership

This project was chaired by Vicki Wood, Director of Child Welfare, Department of Community Services. Joining her on the project's steering committee were:

- Bob Myles, Executive Director, Family and Children's Services of Kings County
- John Rowan, Acting Executive Director, Children's Aid Society of Halifax
- Jean MacDonald, Consultant, Children's Aid Society of Halifax (1.5 days per week)
- Debra Manning, District Manager, Cole Harbour District Office, DCS
- Jeanette Hay Connolly, Manager of Secure Care, DCS
- Judy Elliot, Acting Director of Mental Health, I.W.K. Hospital for Children
- Althea Tolliver, Clinical Director, Nova Scotia Home for Coloured Children
- Leonard Doiron, Coordinator of Child Protection Services, DCS
- Jill Wilson-Kingston, Coordinator of Foster Care Services, DCS
- Lynn Brogan, Child Welfare Specialist, Central Region, DCS
- Janet Nearing, Manager, Adoption and Child In Care Services, DCS
- Jean Bremner, Past President, Children's Aid Society of Halifax, Ex Officio

The following individuals served as chairs of the project's sub-committees, in addition to sitting on the project's steering committee. Members who served with them are listed below the committees titles.

Outcomes, Financial Policy, and Accountability Frameworks

- Lynn Cheek, Child Welfare Specialist, Northern Region, DCS
- Wade Johnston, Executive Director, Chisholm Youth Services

- Linda Wilson, Executive Director, Home Bridge
- John Mildon, Executive Director, Family & Children's Services of Annapolis Co
- Anne Blandford, Executive Director, Children's Aid Society of Pictou Co
- Edward Vale, Executive Director, Family & Children's Services of Hants Co
- Peter Newbery, Coordinator of Regional Financial Management

DCS Client and Financial Data Review

- Lynn Brogan, Child Welfare Specialist, Central Region, DCS
- Jean MacDonald, Consultant, Children's Aid Society of Halifax
- Janet Nearing, Manager, Adoption and Child In Care Services, DCS
- Peter Newbery, Coordinator of Regional Financial Management, DCS
- Greg DaRos, Decision Support Analyst, IT Services, DCS

Services to Families & Alternatives to Placement

- Donald Totten, Child Welfare Specialist, Western Region, DCS
- Robert Wright, Executive Director, Family & Children's Services of Cumberland
- Marika Lathem, Executive Director, Family Services SOS
- Donald Gloade, Casework Supervisor, Mi'kmaw Family & Children's Services
- Brenda Knox-Townsend, Executive Director, Family & Children's Services of Queens
- Natalie Downey, Coordinator, Growing Together Dartmouth Family Centre
- Roxanne Manning, Prevention Coordinator, Department of Community Services
- Jane Earle, Executive Director, Restorative Justice Society
- Randi Robicheau, Casework Supervisor, Family & Children's Services of Hants
- Gary Landry, Executive Director, Family & Children's Services of Yarmouth

Best Practices: Effective Management of Dangerous Behaviour

- Martha Gillis, Coordinator, Community Residential Services, DCS
- Susan Fitzgerald, Clinical Director, Chisholm Youth Services
- Laura MacDonald, Program Manager, Dayspring Children's Centre
- Peter MacRury, Team Leader, Residential Centre
- Wendy Rhindress, Co-Director, Mullins House
- Marguerite MacGillivray, Parent Counsellor Program, Children's Aid Society of Inverness - Richmond
- Sterling Murray, Unit Supervisor, Wood Street Centre
- Deborah Thibault, Coordinator of Training, Federation of Foster Families of Nova Scotia
- Kevin Walker, Coordinator for Services for Children, YACRO
- Donelda MacDonald, A Coordinator, Direct Family Support to Children with Disabilities, DCS

Services to Children with Disabilities

- Patricia Swan, Community Support Specialist, DCS
- Joan Paquette, Yarmouth Association of Community Residential Options
- Mary Anne Hannas, Coordinator of Placement Services, DCS
- Shelley Boutilier, Dalhousie University
- Kathryn McCarthy, IHSP Social Worker, Western Region
- Peggy Keating, Department of Community Services
- Tonya Boudreau, Respite Coordinator, Western Region
- Mary Claire MacIntosh, Highland Community Residential Services

Work Plan

The project group consulted published research and best practices in a number of specific areas of practice, findings of previous placement services reviews, and reviews and services of other jurisdictions. Areas included:

- treatment literature
- outcomes literature
- international jurisdictional review
- assessments & levels of care
- best practices in management of dangerous behaviour
- community based interventions
- prevention services
- differential responses: child welfare
- outcomes for children & youth ageing out of care

Consultations were held with youth in care and senior officials within policing services, youth justice, and children's mental health. Two focus group sessions were held with key stakeholders, with over 70 foster parents, residential service providers, community agencies, and community organizations, such as the Federation of Foster Parents, and the Nova Scotia Council of the Family.

The group also conducted surveys, and gathered and analyzed raw data. These inquiries included:

- three page survey of the school enrollment and educational circumstances of all children in residential facilities
- 14 page structured interviews with four out of province placement providers (Robert Smart, Wood's Home, Hull Homes, Cinnamon Hills), the IWK's Adolescent Centre for Treatment, and the Justice's Nova Scotia Youth Centre
- all child maintenance expenditures for 126 children over a six year period
- financial data and occupancy patterns for residential centres
- six year licensing history of all residential programs
- outcome of all prospective foster parents referred to agencies and district offices for home studies
- the placement history of eight client samples, extracted from the department's management information system
- youth court data cross referenced to child children in care, to identify joint clients

The client samples provided a critical source of information. The children's samples were drawn from:

- all children in residential care on March 31, 2004 (sample size: 131);
- all children and youth in out-of-province placements on March 31, 2004 (sample size: 25);
- thirty children four years of age in foster care on March 31, 2004;
- thirty children seven years of age in foster care on March 31, 2004;
- thirty children 12 years of age in foster care on March 31, 2004;
- thirty youth 16 years of age in foster care on March 31, 2004;
- 48 children and youth admitted to the secure care centre in its first year of operation;
- 36 youth who returned from out-of province placements between 2001-2004, and,
- educational status of 181 children in Nova Scotia licensed residential child-caring facilities on January 31,2005.

Key Findings

The findings of the placement project can be grouped into three areas. The first category reports on the outcomes for the children receiving placement services. The second category focuses on issues related to the delivery of placement services. The third category recognizes that out of home care is an intrusive and costly intervention. It reports on services for families at home that have the potential to prevent or shorten the duration of placement.

1: Outcomes for Children:

Permanency Planning & Continuity of Care

The complete placement history records were reviewed for 360 children, or 18 per cent of all children in care. This data can show, on average, how long children receive placement services, and how often they move from one placement to another.

Every child must have a comprehensive plan of care if they are going to be placed for more than 90 days. The case plan should be developed jointly by the social worker, with input from the child, foster parents, residential service providers, and where possible, the child's family, and others involved in the child's care. Every child's case plan must centre upon one of four possible goals for permanency:

- reunification with parents;
- adoption (family and non-relative);
- guardianship with extended family, or
- successful transition to independence.

The project findings indicate that permanency planning for children requires significant improvements. It was found that on average, children remain in placement services for several years, and experience multiple moves between placements. This was found to be true for children of all ages, beginning in infancy irrespective of whether they were placed in foster care or residential services.

The province has introduced several new initiatives to improve permanency planning for children. These include a public awareness campaign and legislative changes to facilitate adoption. Additional social workers have been hired to support enhanced adoption services. New child-in-care standards, accompanied by staff training have also been introduced. The new project findings on children's length of time in care, and frequency of moves between placements indicates that a provincial evaluation or auditing function should be introduced to ensure the desired outcomes from these new initiatives are achieved.

Supporting Children's Learning Needs

The Children and Family Services Act states that when children are placed, they should be cared for as if by wise and conscientious parents. Supporting children at school is a responsibility that most parents consider a priority. The project collected information from 30 residential facilities and 17 licensed small options homes, regarding the emphasis placed on supporting children's learning needs. Surveys completed by residential service providers on the 181 children in their care on January 31, 2005 found:

- 18 of the 181 youth were not registered in school and another 25 youth were registered but not attending school.
- the majority of residents were at a grade level below their age peers.

- only 12 per cent of residents in the survey were receiving tutoring (23 of 181)
- residential programs with on-site accredited educational programs did not have a formal policy of reintegrating children back into their community schools when ready to do so

The findings suggest that improvements are required with respect to the emphasis placed on supporting children's learning needs. On an individual level, priority must be given to each child's learning needs when developing and monitoring their comprehensive plan of care. At a program level, placement services should develop linkages to schools, career development and employment programs, to ensure that youth receive the assistance they require to achieve a successful transition to independence.

Serving Children with Complex Needs

The project found that a small but still appreciable number of children and youth enter care with very complex and challenging needs, including behavioural and emotional disturbances, serious mental health and medical problems, and significant long term disabilities.

Many residential providers reported that interventions that were successful in the past are no longer as effective in managing children's dangerous behaviour, as expressed through high risk taking, self harm and aggression towards others.

The occupancy rates and discharge data suggest that many residential programs lack the training and preparation necessary to meet the needs of children who present dangerous behaviours. One of the five working groups focused specifically on building capacity within the residential sector to prevent and manage dangerous behaviour. Though their work will not be presented in detail in this report, it will be very important at the implementation stage of the placement project.

The placement project found that many children and youth who have had incidents of dangerous behaviour are not accepted by many service providers. At other times, placement providers agree to admit them under the condition that their social workers provide extra staffing to assist with behaviour management. Five years of maintenance expenditures were run on the 126 clients who were in a residential facility on March 31, 2004. Eighty-five (67 per cent) had received additional placement support staff, for a total cost of $2.1 million dollars.

Difficulties remain, despite such a significant investment over a five year period. Therefore, the current pattern of labour intensive ad hoc solutions, made on a child by child basis, should be replaced with a restructured system that includes designated provincial programs for children and youth with complex needs. Resources currently allocated for extra staffing should be redirected to staff training and upgrades to physical plants, to develop the organizational capacity to provide the range of interventions required by children with challenging behaviours.

2. Service Delivery Issues

Residential System Capacity

With regard to the residential capacity, three findings stood out as significant. First, residential services are fragmented across many providers. Consequently, most are too small to deliver a range of services, with specialized supports, in a cost effective manner. A review of 30 child welfare residential expenditures found:

- in 2003/04, costs per day of care ranged between $207 - $507
- in 2004/05, costs per day of care ranged between $219 - $570

There appeared to be little relationship between the cost for a day of care and the level of care provided. Some of the most costly programs deliver less intensive service than others within the lowest range of costs. In most cases, variance in costs are directly related to size and the administrative structure of residential facilities, rather than the content of the program.

Second, several child welfare facilities charge per diems on par with intensive, highly structured programs delivered in other provinces or states. However, they cannot match the therapeutic interventions provided by those facilities. The project found that the ratio of youth workers to children in these facilities are within the Canadian average and best practices. However, they require greater access to multi-disciplinary staff and specialized programming.

The survey of four out-of-province providers, and two programs in other sectors in Nova Scotia (children's mental health and youth justice) found that all have access to:

- dedicated psychologist, nurse, psychiatrist, medical doctor & social worker;
- on site classrooms with teachers; and
- structured programming, with correspondence education, recreation, anger management, life skills, and art therapy.

Finally, the reviewers found that the system requires a range of programs with clearly articulated program mandates and goals, matched to the diversity of child welfare clients, as an alternative to the current system, where generic standards, and uniform levels of supervision and staff ratios are applied across all programs.

Program Mandates

The Department of Community Services currently licenses facilities and approves parent counsellor programs, based upon age and gender, for example, "Females, aged 12 to 16 years". However, these descriptions do not provide organizations with guidance regarding program development, areas of specialization, or the level of care expected for the funding provided.

When considering what a provincial plan of placement services should include, the project team found recommendations in the professional literature and best practices. Research indicates that most children in care require assistance with:

- cognitive difficulties, arising from chronic deprivation and/or chaotic experiences during their early years, when critical brain development and organization occurs;
- emotional difficulties, such as depression and impairments in daily functioning, arising from insecure attachments, chronic stress, loss, trauma from abuse; and
- behavioral difficulties such as chaotic behaviour, poor impulse control, inappropriate sexual behaviour, and aggression, arising from abuse and neglect.

Children and youth with additional needs sometimes require specialized programming. Programs with specific mandates are frequently available for children and youth who struggle with the following primary presenting problems:

- seriously maladaptive behaviour
- significant mental and emotional disturbance
- major developmental impairments
- medically fragile
- children who assault or commit serious crimes
- sexual offenders/sexually acting out children with high risk behaviors

The continuum of services recommended in the professional literature progresses from least intrusive interventions and settings, through to highly structured, intensive programming. The child welfare continuum generally includes:

- home based interventions to prevent placement
- kinship care
- foster care
- treatment foster care (parent counsellor programs)
- residential Care

The range of residential services also progress from least intrusive to highly structured programs:

- emergency shelter, including self-referrals, on a 24 hour basis
- receiving and short term diagnostic services
- supervised / staff apartments for semi-independent youth in transition to adulthood
- community group homes
- residential treatment
- intensive residential treatment (which may include secure care and detention)

Admission Procedures

Although all children are assessed prior to placement, there is no standardized assessment of children in care. Additionally, each provider has its own set of requirements and admission criteria. Therefore, social workers must navigate an overly complex web of individual programs when seeking to place children.

The project team found that this difficulty could be resolved under a new model, if the unique nature of child welfare is taken into consideration. Admission decisions in child welfare actually occur when a social worker or judge brings a child into care. Therefore, referral to placement services should no longer entail admission decisions. Rather, the primary tasks at this point of the process should be assessing the needs of child, and matching him or her with the most appropriate placement resource. Both tasks should be facilitated through the use of standardized assessments for all children and youth.

Effective Use of Placement Resources

In addition to the duplication and gaps present in the program mandates, the project team found that human and financial resources in foster and residential care are also not being used to their full potential.

Under current procedures, families are recruited by regional foster resource teams. Applicant families complete individual interviews, attend six training sessions, and undergo an initial safety assessment, as part of their work with the foster resource teams. They are then transferred to the local child welfare agency or district office, for a home study. Families are not eligible to foster children, until their home study has been approved.

As noted earlier, the project team collected information from agencies and district offices, on the length of time it had taken to complete the home studies of every family referred to them by the foster resource teams. The data showed significant lag times after the transfer, suggesting that families in three of the four regions are not receiving timely service.

For example, in 2003 - 2004 foster families who completed their training, waited for home studies an average of 6.5 months. The professional literature suggests that 90 days is an acceptable goal for the completion of home studies.

The proposed new provincial plan will include programs specifically designated for children and youth presenting higher needs, located in facilities most able to provide the required level of care. The child staff ratios, and licensed capacity for all residential programs, should be reassessed at that time, and set appropriate to the level of care they provide.

A five year review of child welfare's residential programs found an average annual vacancy rate of 20 - 30 per cent, with some programs operating with annual vacancy rates as high at 40 percent.

The findings of the project team suggest that service contracts could be used within a larger accountability framework, to ensure that placement resources are managed in a more efficient, effective manner. To be effective, service contracts must be complemented with clear service expectations, and a comprehensive framework of financial policies. One of the five working groups focused specifically on financial policy and accountability frameworks. Though their work will not be presented in detail in this report, it will be thoroughly reviewed at the implementation stage of placement redesign.

This working group also investigated the role of outcome measures employed by many jurisdictions providing child welfare and placement services. They found that on-going monitoring, program evaluation and quality assurance activities are key to measuring how well the placement services function meets the needs of children in care.

The working group also reviewed tools that have been used successfully by other jurisdictions, to move towards outcome measurement. They found that a program logic model can assist program planning and outcome measurement by linking an organization's program activities and the changes that are expected to occur as a result of these activities. Though it will not be presented in detail in this report, it will be fully considered at the implementation stage of the placement project.

3: Services to Families

Finally, one working group conducted a review of available research regarding approximately twenty-five types of services to families that may decrease the need for more costly and intrusive out of home placements. Examples included parenting support and education, adolescent/parent mediation, intensive home-based services and neighbourhood support programs. They found that there are a number of interventions that have demonstrated promising results in reducing risk to children and other factors that lead to family breakdown.

Their findings also confirmed that many families struggle with issues that span the mandates of several programs. The professional literature recommends that child welfare develop stronger linkages with grant funded community agencies. Not only do these agencies support families at risk, but they also strengthen the capacity of their local community. The literature also recommends stronger linkages be developed between child welfare and services delivered by the health, mental health, education and justice sectors. Finally, research indicates that family group conferencing, and other interventions that engage extended family caregivers have demonstrated very positive outcomes in other jurisdictions.

Though the work of the services to families group will not be presented in detail in this report, their work will be very important at the implementation stage of the placement project.

Assessment of Options

The findings of the project team are familiar to most other jurisdictions delivering child welfare services. As other jurisdictions have found, adjustments within the current paradigm cannot bring about the level of change required to meet the needs of children and youth entrusted to the Minister's care. Rather, the findings call for a complete restructuring of placement services. This is achievable, but will require an incremental, multi-step, phased in approach.

Values and Principles of Service Delivery

Recognizing the scope of placement redesign, the steering committee decided that its first priority was to develop a clearly articulated framework to guide the development of the new system of placement services. The following seven values were chosen the embodiment of what child welfare's placement services should aspire to. The principles of service delivery were chosen by the steering committee, as a blueprint for how these values can best be achieved. Together, they form the foundation for steering committee's recommendations to the Minister. They are also intended to guide operational planning, policies and service delivery practices developed during implementation phases, to be led by the Department of Community Services.

The first value listed in the following table is the desire to improve outcomes for children. In fact, this was the overriding consideration of the steering committee, in the assessment of options, the formulation of all the values and principles of service delivery, and foundational to all the placement recommendations.

VALUES

- Improve outcomes for children in care.
- Serve children in Nova Scotia, whenever possible.
- Achieve maximum benefit for clients within available funding.
- Deliver placement services through a collaborative, team approach among child welfare agencies, foster parents and residential service providers.
- Utilize fully the expertise available within other DCS and provincial programs, and community-based agencies.
- Foster self-reliance of families and children in care.
- Reduce unnecessary or prolonged dependency on the formal child welfare system, through of promotion community capacity and natural support systems for families.

SERVICE PRINCIPLES

1. Comprehensive care planning
(Plan of Care as the heart of Case Management)

- Consistent with Children in Care manual, an inclusive process will be used to develop and monitor each child's plan of care.
- Foster parents, residential service providers, along with the child/youth, and where possible, his/her family, shall be ongoing participants in the case planning process.
- Care plans will focus on specific measurable child outcomes to achieve permanency. The four permanency options shall be the cornerstone of each child's plan (parent's home, adoption, extended family guardianship, or independent living).

- The Minister will monitor case planning for all children in permanent care, through the establishment of an annual review process.

- Responsive placement services, grounded in the principles of normalization and community inclusion, are critical to the success of every child's case plan for permanency. Therefore, the duration of placements should be for the briefest period possible required to be effective. Programs should support an expedient return from highly structured and restrictive programs to normalized community based settings, to prevent children from becoming dependent upon an "artificial" living situations and supports.

- Services that support children, youth and families at home, thereby averting the necessity of placement, are an important alternative to placement services. Therefore, a new array of services that have been demonstrated as successful in preventing placement in other jurisdictions, should be introduced as a formal program, as part of the redesign of placement services.

2. Placement coordination and navigation processes
(Admissions Directors with authority to place children)

- The placement admission decision is made when the social worker or judge brings a child into care. Therefore, referral for placement services shall be regarded as a social work case management function, whereby the needs of the child shall be matched to the most appropriate placement service.

- The authority and accountability to place children will be consolidated, through the appointment of directors of admissions. Reporting to the Regional Administrators, admission directors will work in partnership with their counterparts in other regions, to ensure fair and equitable access to residential services, specialized foster care and parent counsellor programs.

- A standardized assessment tool will be used to determine the child's needs and the most appropriate level of care, for all placement services, including foster care.

- Since decisions affecting admissions to facility and occupancy will be made by an admissions director on the basis of the level of care required, the current funding model and occupancy factor will be obsolete, and replaced by a 100 per cent operating grant.

- Child welfare services should promote the integrity of the family, and enhance community capacity, wherever possible. Therefore, services should be coordinated with other DCS and provincial programs, and developed and delivered in partnership with other community based agencies, and service providers.

- The community based differential response program should include a multi- systemic intervention with other service providers, as an alternative option to residential placement for youth with behavioral issues.

3. Full range of services based on levels of care
(Continuum of Care)

- The Minister is responsible to ensure that available resources are deployed to serve the full range of needs of children in care. This shall occur through the establishment of a continuum of funded core services with individually approved mandates and service components.
- The Minister will establish a range of placement mandates based upon industry standard program descriptions, as supported in research, the professional literature, and recognized best practices.
- Through coordination with child-in-care social workers, foster parents and residential service providers will be responsible to provide purposeful interventions that support and achieve the established case goals.
- Residential programs will be differentiated on the basis of the level of care provided. The level of care provided will also determine child-staff ratios, staff qualifications, and levels of remuneration.
- The level of care will reflect a child's capacity to interact within the community (access to community-based supports or availability of on-site supports) and their requirements for structure, supervision and support.
- The continuum of care requires multi-disciplinary expertise from other providers, in addition to the core social work and youth care services currently provided.
- Children will enter care with varying levels of need, and most will not require the full continuum. However, the distribution of resources must ensure that all components of the continuum be available in Nova Scotia to address the needs of various sub-populations.
- Though every component of care cannot be offered in each community, all children in care must have access to the level of service they require. The continuum will include programs which will meet the placement requirements of children with complex needs, and able to prevent and manage dangerous behaviour.
- The effective prevention and management of dangerous behaviour requires a comprehensive policy framework, revised standards of practice, and investment in staff training. These must be accompanied by an appropriate system external monitoring and internal quality assurance practices.
- A new continuum of care will establish the type of settings, number of beds, levels of care, demographic distribution and geographic locations. The implementation will require an assessment of existing resources. Some current sites/facilities and services may not meet future needs, reflect level of care requirements or provide the necessary economies of scale.
- Existing program expertise and placement resources will be redeployed when appropriate or feasible.

4. Reduce complexity, streamline practice, reduce administrative demands (comprehensive per diems and phase out policy 94)

- Enable social workers, foster parents and residential service providers to increase their emphasis on planning for children by reducing several administrative practices. The development of inclusive per diems for residential and foster care services, and simplification of policy 94 are priorities in this regard.
- Streamlined financial and administrative functions should apply accounting practices which ensure that appropriate levels of checks and balances are in place.

5. Provincial framework for planning

- A provincial framework for placement services will provide a long range perspective and comprehensive vision for how placement services should be planned, developed, funded and monitored.
- The provincial framework will include an accountability framework consisting of financial policies, program policies, an annual service contracting process and approved outcome measures.
- The provincial framework will clearly establish authority and accountability structures.
- The provincial framework will provide for the on-going collection and analysis of reliable, objective data for planning and decision-making purposes.
- The provincial framework will incorporate the flexibility to initiate changes to the configuration of services based upon changing demographics and client needs.

6. Outcomes, evaluation and quality assurance (annual service contracts, annual review of child in care plans, licensing, review of the new placement model)

- On-going monitoring, program evaluation and quality assurance activities will be key to measuring how well the placement services are functioning and meeting the needs of the children in care.
- An outcome-based approach at the child and system levels can provide an indication of progress in meeting policy objectives and the well being of children in care.
- Outcomes based upon developmental dimensions are important indicators of child well being, and should include: safety; health; education; identity; family; social and community relationships; social presentation; emotional and behavioral development; and, self care skills.
- A program logic model is a useful tool for program planning and outcome measurement by linking an organization's program activities and the changes that are expected to occur as a result of these activities.
- A logic model that defines program theory, activities and interventions, inputs, outputs and outcomes based upon key developmental dimensions for children, would be an appropriate model for child welfare residential services. Program outputs and outcomes should become part of the service contract commitment with the province.

- An outcomes based approach should be phased in over time, and requires an investment in technology and training. Outcomes should be established with the input of service providers and other key stakeholders.

- Given the high risk nature of child welfare, evaluating outcomes must be regarded as a supplement to, rather than a replacement for regular monitoring and evaluating processes.

7. Strengthen ties between child welfare & other programs

- To increase the range of placement services and supports, the new service continuum will make the bridge between child welfare and other program areas, including: the differential response model, with designated community- based agencies; preparation for independent living and employment support programs; and, joint service delivery with other departments (health & mental health, justice and education).

8. Education and vocational preparation

- Every child's comprehensive plan of care shall identify a individual who is part of the child's care team, who is responsible to work with the educational system and schools on behalf of the child.

- Children should receive consistent and equitable access to educational supports, with policy direction that:
  i) prioritizes tutoring supports to residents; and
  ii) governs on-site residential school programs to ensure re-integration of residents into community school programs.

- Engage expertise to assist with child in care planning, where required to address the learning needs of children in care.

- Ensure that youth receive appropriate career assistance and preparation for independence, through improved linkage to existing alternative educational and employment programs, and new partnerships with non-profit community- based organizations.

9. Change Management

- The reform recommended for child welfare's placement system represents an innovative step forward for children and families that will impact child welfare clients, service providers, and department staff. Maintaining productive relationships with present service providers through the change process is crucial to achieving redesign goals.

- A change management approach should be utilized that includes consultative processes with affected stakeholders, consumers and staff, communication feedback loops, education to raise awareness and knowledge, and a phase-in approach to implementation.

NOVA SCOTIA
Community Services

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